Plurilingualism in Traditional Eurasian Scholarship

Thinking in Many Tongues

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Language Is a Collective Product of Mankind

Diodorus of Sicily, Library of History (1st Century BCE)

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Narratives or debates on the origin of language are not particularly frequent in archaic and Classical Greek literature. In the Homeric poems no strict linguistic divide exists between gods and humans,[1] although the gods are said to use different names for single rivers, winds, or cities. The fifth-century BCE historian Herodotus (*Histories* 2.2) famously tells about a "scientific" trial ordered by the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus (seventh century BCE) in order to assess the antiquity of languages and nations: the outcome, surprisingly enough, was that the first, "natural" language is Phrygian. This experience, which was imitated in later centuries by various kings such as Frederick II Hohenstaufen, James IV of Scotland and Aqbar the Great of India, starts from a series of underlying assumptions: that a single originary language exists, that it is verbal, that it has been preserved unaltered down to our own day, but also that—once the influence of education is removed—precisely that specific language is innate to all human beings.

That a single originary language once existed is maintained by many Greek writers, but opinions differ as to whether it was innate, or the fruit of divine or human intervention. In Hesiod's *Works and Days* (seventh century BCE) the god Hermes (later etymologized as "he who devised speech," *to eirein emesato*, in Plato's *Cratylus*, 407e), endowed Pandora, the first woman, with an *aude* (voice; lines 61, 79–80), perhaps a language different from the common tongue previously shared by gods and humans during the Golden Age, before their quarrel and separation. In the Egyptian narrative of man's earliest times the god Theuth/Thoth, identified with Hermes, is said to have articulated "the common language of mankind," attributing a name "to many nameless objects," and "inventing the alphabet" (this is the account given by the first-century BCE Greek historian Diodorus of Sicily, 1.16.1).[2] In an alternative and isolated nar-

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1 The first such instance is in the slightly later (seventh–sixth century BCE?) *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* (lines 113–116), where the goddess very naturally declares to Anchises her proficiency in both the Trojan and the Phrygian tongue.

2 Similarly in the *Odes* of the Latin poet Horace (1.10.1–3, trans. Bennett): "O Mercury, grandson

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rative, perhaps influenced by the Babel story, Hermes divided languages between different groups of men, who were formerly speaking *una lingua*: this multiplicity is presented by Hyginus as conducive to mutual discord (Hyginus *Fabulae* 143, first century BCE).

While cultural heroes such as Palamedes (otherwise identified as the inventor of writing and numbers) and Prometheus (the benefactor of mankind *par excellence*) are rarely presented as the creators of language,[3] this role is more frequently ascribed to men, be they the early "namesetter" of Plato's dialogue on language, the *Cratylus* (388e–390e), or the ancient lawgivers of the age of Kronos who, according to Stoic philosophers, shaped an entirely rational language for living creatures (was this the same ancestral language shared by men and animals in Platonic thought?).[4] In the great myth of Plato's *Protagoras*, language (actually: "voice and names") occurs immediately after religion (and before all other inventions such as houses, clothes, shoes, etc.) in the chronology of man's achievements:[5] it is articulated by humans without any external help, much as in the famous choral song of Sophocles's *Antigone* on the power of man,[6] and much as opposed to what we see in Euripides's play *Suppliant Women*, where it appears as a gift of one god, and one of the steps of mankind's progress.[7]

Three authors of the first century BCE, perhaps all going back to a single, late Hellenistic source, converge in presenting language as the fruit of an original, collective effort of mankind, obtained through a gradual progress from con-

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eloquent of Atlas, thou that with wise insight didst mold the savage ways of men just made, by giving speech and setting up the grace-bestowing wrestling-ground." But the same Horace ascribes this invention to man in his *Satires* (1.3.99–104).

3   A possible exception in the fifth-century play *Prometheus Bound* attributed to Aeschylus: "And indeed I discovered for them number, outstanding among subtle devices, and the combining of letters as a means of remembering all things, the Muses' mother, skilled in craft." *Prometheus Bound* 459–461, trans. Gera.

4   As in Plato's *Politicus* (272b–d); by men, animals, and vegetals in Babrius's preface to his *Aesopic Fables* (third century CE).

5   See Plato, *Protagoras* 322a, trans. Lamb: "he soon was enabled by his skill to articulate speech and words, and to invent dwellings, clothes, sandals, beds, and the foods that are of the earth."

6   "And he [man] taught himself speech and wind-like thought and the temper that regulates cities." 354–356.

7   "I praise that one of the gods who in due measure separated our human life from chaos and the bestial: first he implanted in us intelligence, then gave us language as a means of communication, so that we might understand discourse." Euripides, *Suppliant Women* 201–204, trans. Morwood.

fused sounds to articulated utterances: the Roman architect Vitruvius[8] links the rise of language to the taming of fire in the progress of human civilization; the orator and philosopher Cicero[9] attributes a decisive role to reason, to a *mens* that guided humans and bound them together by separating unformed sounds into classes and assigning words to things—in this view, language is propaedeutic to common life between humans, and to the rise of human society.

On a slightly different note, the historian Diodorus of Sicily presents men as drawn to language by necessity: in his account (probably going back, through the aforementioned Hellenistic source, to doctrines as old as the fifth century BCE), the progress from collective cries uttered by dispersed and primitive men towards a shared set of names is described as the result of a common life prompted by the humans' need to protect themselves from beasts. In this view (much as in the Stoic and Platonic views, and as opposed to what we have seen above in Chapter 1.4 in the Epicurean doctrine), names and language—even if they are indirectly prompted by the context of surrounding nature—remain entirely conventional, and therefore develop differently from one society of men to the other.

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8 "They added fuel, and thus keeping it up [viz. the fire], they brought others; and pointing it out by signs they showed what advantages they had from it. In this concourse of mankind, when sounds were variously uttered by the breath, by daily custom they fixed words as they had chanced to come. Then, indicating things more frequently and by habit, they came by chance to speak according to the event, and so they generated conversation with one another." Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 2.1.1, trans. Granger.

9 "And when it found human beings making, as it were, rudimentary, confused sounds with crude voices, it broke them up by pauses and distinguished them into parts. And when it imprinted words on things like a kind of sign, it bound together previously disunited human beings through the most agreeable bond of conversation." Cicero, *On the Republic* 3.2.3, trans. Fott.

Greek Text

Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History* 1.8.1–4, excerpted from *Bibliothèque Historique*, tome I, trans. Yvonne Vernière, ed. Pierre Bertrac (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1993), 37.

Καὶ περὶ μὲν τῆς πρώτης τῶν ὅλων γενέσεως τοιαῦτα παρειλήφαμεν, τοὺς δὲ ἐξ ἀρχῆς γεννηθέντας τῶν ἀνθρώπων φασὶν ἐν ἀτάκτῳ καὶ θηριώδει βίῳ καθεστῶτας σποράδην ἐπὶ τὰς νομὰς ἐξιέναι, καὶ προσφέρεσθαι τῆς τε βοτάνης τὴν προσηνεστάτην καὶ τοὺς αὐτομάτους ἀπὸ τῶν δένδρων καρπούς. Καὶ πολεμουμένους μὲν ὑπὸ τῶν θηρίων ἀλλήλοις βοηθεῖν ὑπὸ τοῦ συμφέροντος διδασκομένους, ἀθροιζομένους δὲ διὰ τὸν φόβον ἐπιγινώσκειν ἐκ τοῦ κατὰ μικρὸν τοὺς ἀλλήλων τύπους. Τῆς φωνῆς δ᾽ ἀσήμου καὶ συγκεχυμένης ὑπαρχούσης ἐκ τοῦ κατ᾽ ὀλίγον διαρθροῦν τὰς λέξεις, καὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλους τιθέντας σύμβολα περὶ ἑκάστου τῶν ὑποκειμένων γνώριμον σφίσιν αὐτοῖς ποιῆσαι τὴν περὶ ἀπάντων ἑρμηνείαν. Τοιούτων δὲ συστημάτων γινομένων καθ᾽ ἅπασαν τὴν οἰκουμένην, οὐχ ὁμόφωνον πάντας ἔχειν τὴν διάλεκτον, ἑκάστων ὡς ἔτυχε συνταξάντων τὰς λέξεις· διὸ καὶ παντοίους τε ὑπάρξαι χαρακτῆρας διαλέκτων καὶ τὰ πρῶτα γενόμενα συστήματα τῶν ἁπάντων ἐθνῶν ἀρχέγονα γενέσθαι.

English Translation

Adapted from Diodorus of Sicily, *Library of History*, trans. C.H. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 1:31.

Concerning the first generation of the universe, this is the account which we have received.[10] But the first men to be born, they say, led an undisciplined and bestial life, setting out one by one to secure their sustenance and taking for their food both the tenderest herbs and the fruits of wild trees. Then, since they were attacked by the wild beasts, they came to each other's aid, being instructed by expediency, and when gathered together in this way by reason of their fear, they gradually came to recognize their mutual characteristics. And though the sounds which they made were at first unintelligible and indistinct, yet gradually they came to give articulation to their speech, and by agreeing with one another upon symbols for each thing which presented itself to them, made known among themselves the significance which was to be attached to each term.[11] But since groups of this kind arose over every part of the inhabited world, not all men had the same language, inasmuch as every group organized the elements of its speech by mere chance. This is the explanation of the present existence of every different kind of language, and, furthermore, out of these first groups to be formed came all the original nations of the world.[12]

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10   This sentence ends the section devoted by Diodorus (1, 7) to his cosmogonic account, which is very close to that offered by Ovid in the first lines of his *Metamorphoses*, and probably goes back to a late Hellenistic Stoic source.

11   What is important here is that language is presented as originally created by humans in order to understand one another, under the adverse constrictions of nature. Natural threats (whether the attacks of wild beasts or, as in Vitruvius, the need for fire) represent ideal opportunities for gathering crowds of people.

12   In this view, the plurality of languages is basically the fruit of chance, but the Stoics (possibly Posidonius in Strabo's polemic in *Geography* 2.3.7) also invoked "providence" (*pronoia*) to explain the differentiation from an original language—a process foreign to Diodorus's theory in this passage.

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